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## **Affect, Empathy, and Engagement: Reading African Conflict in the Global Literary**

### **Marketplace**

Writing Africa has never been a simple matter. By now it seems something of a truism to state that the Africa that has emerged in literature is little more than a myth created across four centuries of writing around the continent. Indeed, since the earliest days of colonial expansion Africa has been more than simply a place. Instead, the continent has occupied a dense and fraught symbolic role in the “global” – that is to say, Euro-American – imaginary. Africa is remote; Africa is desolate; Africa is a place of untold horrors and exquisite mystery, existing outside of the vestiges of historical time. Most critically, this imagined Africa is a place where we, the Western reader-cum-explorer, may learn something about ourselves, a canvas on which our anxieties may be written and our better selves placed in stark relief. Of course, this caricatured vision of Africa is far from uniform, and, as any scholar of African literatures would be aware, a range of far more attentive, nuanced, and careful readings exist concurrently. Indeed, studies including Zoe Norridge’s *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (2012), Neil ten Kortenaar’s *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy* (2011), and Suzan Z. Andrade’s *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms* (2011), amongst others, demonstrate the complexity with which contemporary readers and thinkers approach the continent’s literary image. Equally, recent years have seen the resurgence of area studies as a corrective to the homogenising view of the continent, with works such as Daria Tunca’s *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* (2014) indicating a revitalised approach to the highly specified context of Africa’s many literatures, plural. The very notions of “Africa,” “Europe,” and “America” as distinct categories of readers and writers has been further complicated through the transnational

flow of subjects and diasporas. Yet, there remains a sense in which the spectre of Africa as the “dark continent” remains evident, particularly in the presentation of African conflict through the global media. As Kenyan writer Yvonne Owuor laments, “even if the names referred to are eliminated, you and I can always tell a particular global media piece which narrates the experience of war or violence in Africa [...] You all know the catch phrases: Tribal, ethnic, savage, slaughter, barbaric, excesses, hacked to death [...]” (2009: 17). Distilled through these layers of convention, meaning, and taste, writing about and around Africa arrives through a complex interaction between the textual and the extra-literary, evoking the observation that “we [in the West] are often subliminally encouraged to read those texts that do reach us in ways that flatter rather than challenge our preconceptions” (Spencer, 2010: 41). Created against this backdrop, a dynamic emerges in which the aesthetic function of the literary text is always implicitly positioned alongside a parallel and pre-existing sociopolitical discourse of representation, one which draws upon images of savage and saviour, victim and perpetrator, and Africa as the irredeemable space of postcolonial failure, exemplified in the trafficking of images which elide historical context and emphasize the superordinate position of the outsider/viewer in gazing upon a homogenized space of suffering. Under this tradition the continent serves as little more than “a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (Achebe, 1988: 3), its existence serving only to provide us with a “reciprocal contrast” (Hammond and Jablow, 1992: 11) through which to highlight the measure of our own largesse in the face of its ills.

While in its contemporary guise the image of Africa has shifted considerably, certain continuities nonetheless remain. Though the continent may no longer be explicitly positioned as simply “a free field for the play of European fantasy” (Hammond and Jablow, 1992: 12), met in

the twenty-first century with a greater sensitivity and a greater complexity, there remains a sense in which Africa has retained its instrumentality as a place both savage and in need of saving, a place which is already known – homogenous in its uniform complicity with an a priori notion of the dark continent – and utterly strange – that land of evacuated humanity in need of Western benevolence to enter into modernity. In this essay, I explore the lingering influence of these issues on the textual portrayal and reception of Africa in the American and European markets, considering the extent to which contemporary literary engagements with Africa might represent a genuine shift in thought away from an a priori notion of Africa as the dark continent, on the one hand, and the persistence of an overdetermined tradition of writing Africa, on the other. I do so through readings of two novels which explicitly engage with the tradition of writing Africa in their narrative forms, Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010) and Dave Egger's *What Is the What* (2006). Crucially for my argument, both novels engage in depictions of African conflict oriented towards a metropolitan readership, and both ultimately develop insights on the relative limits of empathy, affect, and ethical understanding in the face of an overwhelmingly static image of Africa. Both works thus question the efficacy of humanitarianism, playing on the long-standing trope of the "civilizing mission" on the continent, and both trouble the basis on which the idea of Africa as inherently knowable and simultaneously already-known has circulated across a transnational imaginary dominated by "a fantasy of a continent and a people that never were and never could be" (Hammond and Jablow 1992: 13), which serves less as a place in itself than as a means of defining the Euro-American self.

*The Memory of Love* tells the intertwined stories of three men: Adrian, a British psychologist who moves to Sierra Leone in an attempt to help rehabilitate the nation as it comes out of its decade-long civil war; Elias Cole, an elderly patient of Adrian's who recounts his life

in post-independence Sierra Leone to the doctor; and Kai, an enigmatic young Sierra Leonean surgeon who befriends Adrian early in his stay. The novel explicitly engages with the relative worth of testimony in the face of atrocity and the difficulty of ethical engagement in the face of the remote and the horrific, themes which are echoed throughout *What Is the What*. In that novel, Eggers weaves a first person narrative from the perspective of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, recounting his life during the second Sudanese Civil War and subsequent resettlement in America. Subtitled *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*, the work confounds generic boundaries in its play on a tradition of testimonial writing around the African continent. According to the publicity material surrounding the novel, Deng, through the head of the Lost Boys Foundation, approached Eggers when looking for someone to write his story. A youth leader in his community and frequent guest lecturer beyond, Deng was eager that his tale be more widely transmitted, a sentiment which he describes as a desire “to reach out to others to help them understand Sudan’s place in our global community” (Eggers, 2006: xiv). Through a series of meetings, emails, and phone calls, Eggers and Deng would spend the next several years together, reconstructing Deng’s story, what we the audience read on the pages of *What Is the What*. Both *The Memory of Love* and *What Is the What* explicitly call into question the normative methods through which Africa circulates in the global imaginary, and both novels contest the often-simplistic epistemophilic-cum-humanitarian view of the continent so often received. Neither novel is reducible to the other; indeed, both Forna’s and Egger’s works emerge from distinct historical moments and fields of representation which are not commensurate to one another. Yet, both novels share an engagement with, and subversion of, the imaginative horizons which demarcate the possibilities of post-conflict writing around the African continent, , calling

into question the normativity of categories of affective and empathic response in a transnational context.

### **Cosmopolitan criticism, ethics and empathy**

Both Forna's and Eggers's novels engage with a critical reflection on the interlinked notions of affect and ethical understanding in the depiction of African suffering. By explicitly questioning the extent to which a literary encounter with Africa may provide unfettered access to the continent as a space simultaneously alien and knowable, what Huggan has described as literature's role as "the more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous [...] African world" (2001: 37), *The Memory of Love* and *What Is the What* simultaneously question the efficacy of empathic identification over differentials of power, assumed knowledge, and geography. By so doing, these works engage in a self-consciously ironic critique of the image of Africa as a space for Euro-American humanitarian self-realization, questioning what has been described as the "crisis of pity" at the heart of global aid communication (Chouliaraki 2010: 108). In this preoccupation with what the image of distant suffering may offer its readers, neither novel is unique; indeed, this notion that literature may serve as a means of engagement with those places and people who are physically remote has taken a particular currency in scholarship in recent years. This form of cosmopolitan criticism, as Spencer terms it, suggests that "reading postcolonial literature[s] can engender the critical consciousness and the global solidarities that are required to imagine, inaugurate and sustain cosmopolitan political arrangements" (Spencer, 2010: 37). Leveraging what Attridge (2004) has termed "the singularity of literature", the text becomes the site of an ethical transaction with its reader. Through the "affective mediation" (May, 2008: 908) enacted by

reading, the privileged (and usually Euro-American) reader may enter into the mind, life, and experience of those who remain socially, politically, economically, and geographically remote, thereby both learning to better empathize with these far-flung others while simultaneously effecting social change through the empathic call to responsibility. Cosmopolitan criticism thus foregrounds readings which engage with the sort of complexity and humanization that the dominant tradition of writing Africa has historically effaced, supposing a form of affective identification which may better promote a global vision of social justice (Pedwell, 2012b: 280). Literature, in this sense, engages with its utopian potentiality, leveraging what one commentator has described as its ability to “enable [the Western reader] to realize a humane imagination of others [...] and] demand[] that privileged Western readers entertain” their voices (Yost, 2011: 166). By so doing, the imaginative potential of literary writing may allow a way to overcome the largest barrier to empathy, the fact that “if we are not sufficiently similar to those with whom we empathize, imaginatively projecting ourselves into their circumstances would not be a reliable guide to how they feel” (Snow, 2000: 71), instead allowing us unmitigated access to the emotional worlds of these others.

At the core of this view of literature, then, is the idea that through the act of reading we may both expand our horizons and better ourselves in the process, using the text to “open our eyes to possibilities of moral seriousness which are wider than those we happen to agree with and wider than those prevalent in a society at any given time” (Phillips, 1982: 62). In so doing, cosmopolitan criticism engages in a longer history of humanitarian communication, what Lilie Chouliaraki describes as “the rhetorical practices of transnational actors that engage with universal ethical claims [...] to mobilize action on human suffering” (2010: 108) through “a series of subtle proposals as to how we should feel and act towards suffering, which are

introduced into our everyday life by mundane acts of mediation [...] and shape our longer-term dispositions to action” (2010: 110). Knowing that “literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life” (Nussbaum, 1990: 48; similar sentiments are found in Palmer, 1992; McGinn, 1999; Adamsen, Freadman and Parker, 1998), the world of the text may somehow expand beyond its own boundaries, becoming part of our own existence. Yet, as Huggan’s conception of the illusory transparency of the anthropological exotic indicates, with this ethical potential comes, too, a concomitant danger. By supposing ourselves to inhabit the struggles and experiences of those who remain socially, politically, economically, and geographically remote, we simultaneously run the risk of engaging in what Pedwell has termed the “forms of projection and appropriation [...] which can reify existing social hierarchies” (2012a: 166). In the case of Africa in particular this danger is (re)doubled through the encroaching specter of the a priori image of Africa, that overdetermined sense in which our encounter with “truth” and “knowledge” through affective engagement is somehow magnified by a sentiment that here reads a story which we already anticipate. It is precisely this elision between the “affective injunction” of empathy (Pedwell, 2012b: 289) and the image of Africa which Forna and Eggers destabilize in constructing narratives which foreground the limits of transparent or straightforward access to an authentic other world, re-drawing the limits of testimonial forms of witnessing. As readings of both novels show, however, any attempt to bypass or transcend this situation remains at risk, mediated by “the global economic and political system[s] that produce[] the third world *as* the third world,” and Africa as Africa (Szeman, 2001: 806-7, emphasis original).



### **Communities of Affect: Fallibility, Reliability, and the A Priori**

Toward the end of Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*, the novel describes an encounter between British psychologist Adrian Lockhart and his Sierra Leonean counterpart Attila, senior psychiatrist at an overstretched Freetown mental hospital. At the time in which this scene takes place, Adrian, an expert in post-traumatic stress disorder, has been volunteering at this clinic for several months, organizing therapy sessions for the inmates, many of whom are young men once involved in Sierra Leone's devastating decade-long civil war. In a meeting briefing Attila on these sessions, Adrian expresses his desire that, through therapy, the men with whom he works may someday be able to return to what he characterizes as "some degree of normality" (Forna, 2010: 318). Much to Adrian's bewilderment, his aspirations that these men may eventually "hold down a job [...] enjoy a relationship [...] marry and have children" (Forna, 2010: 318) are met not with relief or gratitude but with scorn, as Attila demands:

"When I ask you what you expect to achieve for these men, you say you want to return them to normality. So then I must ask you, whose normality? Yours? Mine? So they can put on a suit and sit in an air-conditioned office? You think that will ever happen?"

"No," says Adrian, feeling under attack. "But therapy can help them to cope with their experiences of war."

"This is their reality. And who is going to come and give the people who live *here* therapy to cope with this?" asks Attila and waves a hand at the view. "You call it a disorder, my friend. We call it *life*" (Forna, 2010: 319)

Explaining that, under its generalized diagnostic criteria, over 90% of the Sierra Leonean population might be said to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, Attila's comments make

plain the sheer incommensurability of Adrian's allegedly objective understanding of African suffering and the daily lived experiences of Freetown's populations. Wounded, Adrian is left with the revelation that not only are the tools and techniques of his trade ill-suited for this situation in which he finds himself, but that, more startlingly, "he was neither wanted nor needed. It had simply never occurred to him" (Forna, 2010: 320). This exchange, and the sea-change it effects in Adrian's engagement with the country, is significant on a number of grounds, not the least of which is the magnitude of Adrian's epiphanic encounter with his impotence and the depths of his non-understanding of the seemingly transparent workings of the continent. Having come to the country to combat an encroaching sense of stasis and dissatisfaction with his British life, Adrian, through Attila, discovers something about Africa that has "simply never occurred to him" prior to this: that his aid and his benevolence may, in the final sum of things, be both self-interested at heart and undesired by those it aims to reach, and that the very ground upon which it is built may be fundamentally flawed at its core.

Adrian's failure, Attila's comments suggest, lies precisely in what Pedwell has characterized as the "problems [that] are introduced when a model of empathy centered on 'the individual' and in-depth, one-on-one encounters is extrapolated to transnational arenas" (2012a: 167). Though Adrian may feel sympathy for, and even empathize with, those Sierra Leoneans with whom he comes into personal contact, this act of individual to individual empathic identification fails to translate to a communal and cross-cultural landscape without falling prey to homogenization. Adrian's personal feelings, mediated by the a priori image of Africa which has brought him to this place as its would-be savior, cannot be transposed onto a model for large-scale, transnational responsibility precisely because Adrian knows neither the limits of his own individual experience nor its very particularities. Sierra Leone, standing in as a synecdoche for

Africa as a whole, refuses to be the blank landscape on which Adrian's burgeoning self-image may be drawn. Despite claims that in postcolonial literatures it is the individual who forms the ultimate locus of ethical engagement (May, 2008: 899-900), Adrian's impotence in the face of Attila's remarks points more strongly towards the role that individualized empathic transactions may play in maintaining the "consolidation of existing power hierarchies [...] which can act to reinforce rather than to overcome in justice" (Whitehead, 2012: 183). Recalling, with Sara Ahmed, that "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (2004: 10), Attila's comments thus point to the need to maintain the interconnectedness of the social with the individual, the personal with the structural, and the concomitant need to recognize a fundamental opacity within these transactions. In the face of this knowledge, the interpretive codes and diagnostic criteria upon which Adrian relies cannot be fully transposed to the Sierra Leonean situation, pointing to the gaping chasm which stands between his subject position as Western expert and the material realities of post-conflict Sierra Leone. Adrian's humanitarian zeal fails to have any effect, its very terms and conditions inapplicable in a situation complicated beyond his grasp. For Adrian, this is a transformative moment in his stay in Sierra Leone. Knowing what he does not know and cannot know becomes a moment of personal, professional, and social change, an understanding of non-understanding that provides him with the space within which to form an ethical existence in Freetown. For Adrian, as an outsider in Sierra Leone, a white, British psychologist with all of the privilege and mobility which that entails, what it means to approach Africa fundamentally shifts in this move, and it is only by confronting the tenacity of Africa's a priori image head-on that a more nuanced form of engagement with Sierra Leone and its people reveals itself to him.

The narrative emphasizes the lessons which Adrian learns about empathy, responsibility, and the limits of identification in the face of the remote and unknown in the story of Agnes, a middle-aged woman whom he initially encounters at his hospital and later discovers at Attila's clinic, unable to recall her identity or recent whereabouts. As Adrian soon learns, Agnes is no stranger to Attila's hospital, regularly returning in a similar state of non-comprehension:

From the staff and from the hospital records, Adrian learned there was a pattern to the woman's admissions. Loosely speaking they occurred every six or seven months. On each occasion she'd been found wandering. Hardly extraordinary in a country where so much of the popular had been displaced, still the woman had been brought to the hospital by a stranger or strangers, whose names had sometimes but not always been recorded. [...] Her sojourns at the hospital lasted a few days, two weeks at most, and concluded, Adrian was surprised to read, with a self-discharge on each occasion. (Forna, 2010: 101-2)

Despite an eventual diagnosis of dissociative fugue, Agnes resists Adrian's attempts at treatment, shunning his attempts at talk therapy and refusing to engage further when he pursues her because, as she informs him, "The problems are gone" (Forna, 2010: 204). Apparently resigned to a lifetime of suffering, Agnes seemingly disappears from the narrative with this rebuff, and it is only much later in the novel that we discover the cause of Agnes's trauma: that she is forced to live with the same rebel commander who killed and beheaded her husband before her very eyes and is now married to Agnes's elder daughter, who remains unaware of her husband's past and her mother's perpetual agony.

Critically, for the narrative's engagement with questions of truth, affect, empathy, and responsibility, it is not Adrian who discovers the trauma behind Agnes's condition. Instead, it is

Kai, a young Sierra Leonean surgeon who befriends Adrian early in his stay in Freetown, who is able to gather the pieces of testimony, told by neighbors, relatives, friends, but never Agnes herself, which form together an account of her pain:

People were sent for. A neighbour. A young woman without a smile. An older woman with a creased face and white hair. Kai waited and listened without interrupting or speaking except to greet each new arrival, watch while they took a seat and were told what was required of them. He didn't speak even when they faltered; he offered no solace but left it to others. Each person told a part of the same story. And in telling another's story, they told their own. Kai took what they had given him and placed it together with what he already knew and those things Adrian had told him. (Forna, *Memory* 306)

Reading this passage, Norridge suggests that “the story of Agnes hangs unresolved, [making the reader aware] that narrating an impossible and enduring situation does not necessarily lead to resolution” (2013: 187). To this astute observation, I would add two further points about the textualization of Agnes's story as a synecdoche for African suffering. First, Agnes's story cannot be told from the standpoint of an individual to individual transaction; rather, it is a story told by a community, its pieces coming together without a full resolution, to produce a collective moment of ethical awakening in the confrontation of an impossible past. Directly reckoning with the social implications of individual trauma and affective experience, the recollection of Agnes's story gestures towards another, more complex, and somehow less unproblematically satisfying engagement with language and the power of storytelling, abandoning the monolithic force of a single, a priori narrative of African suffering in favour of a choral rendering replete with an irreducible heterogeneity. If part of what Adrian learns through his stay in Freetown is the ultimate untenability of individual affective transactions as a means of social change, the

collective chorus which recounts Agnes's tale recalls the intractable centrality of communal responsibility and the ultimate implication of the sociality, as a whole, in the transmission of affect, empathy, and understanding. In making Agnes's story their own, that is, each teller devises a way of expressing his or her own trauma and testifying to his or her own unique suffering. By so doing, this collective recollection gestures towards what Pedwell has called the "intertwinement" of the structural and the emotional (2012b: 291), producing the very contours which define the village community. Compounding this effect, the circumstances through which Agnes's story is finally told foreground the ultimate impossibility of a totalizing form of empathic engagement in the face of the remote, echoing Adrian's own awakening: any sort of transparent or easy identification with Agnes's story is made impossible, precisely because it is not Agnes who speaks. As the locus of suffering, Agnes's inability to testify to her own pain signals the extent to which binary models of empathic engagement fail to complete themselves, gesturing instead towards the partial nature of emotional transactions. While Kai, and later Adrian, may feel for Agnes, neither is able to project himself onto her experiences, simply because those experiences are never so easily located upon a single point of space or time. Instead, these experiences can only be observed from an enabling distance, disallowing their appropriation. The instrumental weight of the already-known is untethered by the impossibility of Agnes's story, highlighting the chasm of incommensurability which lies behind Africa's a priori image. Indeed, as Adrian muses when he finally learns Agnes's truth: "It was the story of Agnes, her husband and daughters, of Naasu and JaJa. Everything [he] had known must be true but had never been able to discover, never been able to prove" (Forna, 2010: 441).

At its core, then, *The Memory of Love* plays on the notion of unreliability, the extent to which all single tellings, like all single stories (c.f. Adichie 2009), are by their very nature

partial. In the African context in which the narrative is set, this fundamental sense of unreliability becomes that which calls the a priori narratives of African misery and suffering with which Adrian attempts to engage into question. More directly, in the Sierra Leonean context of the novel, the refusal to authenticate a single story serves as a direct counter to what has been characterised as the “one size fits all” approach of international observers towards the country (Abdullah 2004: 2), an approach in which Sierra Leone may just as easily be Chad, Uganda, Angola, or South Africa without any of its local (and political) specificity. Instead, in giving a face to the pain of the culturally, politically, and socially remote, *The Memory of Love* portrays what Norridge calls “the ways in which the long-term threat of violence, alongside physical and emotional wounding, reconfigures the daily lives of their characters” (2012: 19), and, more critically, positions that wounding as a moment of ethical responsibility in seeing the singularity of the narrative event, its social embeddedness, and the contingency of its creation. Yet, this moment of recognition cannot be conceived of as predicated upon a sense of total transparency. For both Adrian, within the world of the novel, and the reader, approaching the text, the assumption of full confidence and understanding is undermined, and, along with it, the desire for a unified sense of narrative closure is refused, indicating instead a mode of recognition and response which exceeds the boundaries of dichotomous divisions of victim and savior, self and other in favor of a radical multiplicity in language and narrative form. Indeed, it is of no little consequence that Adrian’s story itself makes up only one of three divergent narrative strands, operating in concert with the recollections of Elias Cole and the present-day traumas experienced by Kai, felt in the same register. So counterbalanced, throughout the novel, the impenetrability of the codes of post-conflict Freetown render Adrian’s observational and analytic powers uncertain, inverting the mastery of the white expert over the native victim and rendering partial his attempts

at understanding. The codes and interpretive tools supposed to guarantee such mastery simply do not work, their translatability truncated by the specifics of localized and discrepant materialities. Sierra Leone and the legacies of its civil war remain beyond Adrian, irreducible in their singularity, despite his best attempts at an ethical understanding.

By presenting the fallibility and gradual realization of ignorance of that white, expert observer through its work of “strategic empathy” (Keen, 2007: 96), the novel destabilizes readerly entry into the text and concomitant fall into self-interested “appropriative empathy” (Wood 289), both preventing a sense of false coherence to what remain highly complicated issues of ethics, morality, and responsibility and dislodging the a priori tradition of writing Africa. Simply put, we discover the irreducible complexity which undergirds all systems of knowledge, revealing the fundamentally polyvalent nature of language and emphasising the extent to which no single account or reading may ever propose access to total understanding or transparent knowledge. In so doing, the novel creates a sense in which the very nature of all interpretative forms, including the act of its own reading, must be taken beyond the boundaries of an easy resolution towards a greater ethical encounter. Through this play of form *The Memory of Love* complicates the dynamics of an a priori reading of African conflict and engages instead with heightened questions of readerly responsibility in approaching the text as an other voice and an other self, whose face must be recognized and acknowledged without the imposition of closure through the already-known and already-read (c.f. Butler, 2003). The narrative thus opens itself towards the possibility of understanding otherwise by ceding mastery at the cusp of what has been called “the uncanny moment when we are made to feel not at home with the text or in ourselves” (Eagleton, 1997: 175). Understanding comes to be through the recognition that not everything is fully understandable or decodeable. It is this knowledge of non-knowledge, or of a



different knowledge, that forms what is described as Attila's ability to stand "closer to a kind of truth than anyone else" (Forna, 2010: 219). That truth, then, is neither a priori, absolute, or already out there in the world, nor is it a truth easily accessible or penetrable in its codes and conventions; rather, it is a truth which highlights the fragility of all forms of representational knowledge as it emerges from beneath the overdetermined spectre of the a priori.

### **Testimony, Empathy, and Affective Equivalence**

Aminatta Forna spent her early childhood in Sierra Leone, a period of time part of which is recounted in her memoir *The Devil Danced on the Water* (2002), and which informs her first two novels, *Ancestors Stone* (2006) and *The Memory of Love*, as well as her charitable and journalistic endeavors. With a Sierra Leonean father and having spent part of her childhood in the country, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Scottish writer's work engages to some degree with the codes and conventions through which Africa is written. Dave Eggers, however, is neither African nor tied to the continent by biography. Instead, Eggers is best known for his debut work, the fictionalized memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), the success of which led to the founding of McSweeney's publishing house and magazine and Eggers's charitable work through the 826 Valencia youth literacy project. Despite this fact of authorial biography and the novel's complex provenance, however, *What Is the What* has largely been received as part of the canon of African testimony literature, placed alongside documentary works such as Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2008), John Bul Dau's *God Grew Tired of Us: A Memoir* (2007), and Uwen Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* (2009). Critics have commended the ways in which the novel "offer[s] a model for empathic response" (Twitchell, 2011 624) through its "strategic rhetorical positioning" of Valentino's

story (Powell, 2012: 306); the way it “successfully ‘translates’ a Sudanese story in a way that resonates with Sudanese literature but also urges readers to engage with the ongoing struggles of the people of Sudan” (Brooks, 2010: 36); its “profound and moving account of a traumatic life story” (Peek, 2012: 115); and its exemplary role as a piece of “engaged literature” (Eaglestone, 2008: 84) that “traverses [the] problems and contradictions built into the mode of testimonial discourse itself” (Smith and Watson, 2012: 613), positioning the novel as part of a canon of new African writing in statements both tacit and explicit.

The novel recounts Valentino’s life story from his early childhood years in Mariel Ba, a village in the north Bahr-al-Ghazal region in what is today South Sudan, to his adulthood in America, resettled from the refugee camps of Kenya in an act of humanitarian largesse. Covering the decades-long second Sudanese Civil War, Valentino’s life story rehearses a highly-personalised experience of a conflict which remains frequently misunderstood in the European and American media, reduced either to a case of “ethnic rivalry” or conflated with the Darfur genocide. The root causes of the war remain complex, stemming in part from the divisions imposed under British colonialism; control over natural resources between the north and south of the country; the spread of religious fundamentalism in the region; and unresolved tensions lingering from the first Civil War. Throughout the novel, Valentino’s narration alludes to this intricate background in an intimate register, foregrounding his personal narrative above overt didacticism. Over the course of the American frame narrative, Valentino is violently assaulted and robbed at gunpoint by an African-American couple who he naively allows into his apartment to use the phone; guarded over and assaulted anew by their passive conspirator, a young boy named Michael; ignored and denied adequate medical care in one of Atlanta’s overworked emergency rooms; and left to navigate the streets of the city at three in the morning. Across these

experiences, Valentino is met with apathy and active dissociation by the Americans he encounters, from his neighbors, who ignore his screams for help during and after the robbery, to the emergency room staff, who are unable to provide anything by way of real aid, to the customers at the high-end sports club at which he works, who neither notice nor inquire after his injuries. Running in parallel is Valentino's story of a tranquil childhood existence in rural South Sudan, interrupted by the invasion of government-sponsored militias, setting him on the long path to the refugee camp, and addressed largely as an interior monologue directed at the passive American witnesses to his present-day suffering. Throughout these recollections, the majority of which occur as he is bound and gagged on the floor of his apartment, Valentino attempts to achieve a moment of empathy with these imagined interlocutors, despite their continued refusal.

Throughout its course, *What Is the What* repeatedly calls attention to its metafictional function as a critical commentary on the testimonial genre, gesturing towards its own unreliability in ways which are both implicit and explicit, while simultaneously foregrounding its strategic purpose as an intervention in documentarian perspectives on the African continent, and particularly African conflict, which rely on a single story of suffering and humanitarianism. Early in the narrative, Valentino's narration admits to its utilitarian function, acknowledged in his comments that "sponsors and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. My own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot criticize the accounts of others" (Eggers, 2006: 21). Recognizing the extent to which testimonial accounts must rely, to a certain degree, on the expectations of the a priori in order to engender their desired response, Valentino, with these comments, makes plain the extent to which the norms and conventions through which

testimonial accounts such as his own are read, and the degree to which these readings emerge as affective responses to carefully crafted narrative tales. While seemingly positioned as the throwaway conclusion to his musings on the hierarchy established amongst the Lost Boys both in the refugee camps and once in America, Valentino's claims, in this fictional rendering, serve the dual purpose of both authenticating his story as one imbued with a deeper truth under its "small embellishments" and as one which can only be read through a different lens, calling for a certain critical acumen in its reception in order to receive these embellished moments simply for what they are. That this confessional moment occurs at the end of a paragraph describing the prevalence of certain repeated motifs, including the consumption of hyenas, goats, and human urine as a means of survival, and a mere dozen pages after a scene in which Valentino recounts his own encounters with lions, guns, militiamen, and unspeakable human degradation is of no little consequence in this regard. So juxtaposed, Valentino's narration moves beyond the vestiges of the anthropological extoric and traumatic witnessing into the realm of the self-referential and self-critical, creating a form of strategic appropriation in what it admits as a fictionalization of its more factually accurate, and thereby potentially less-affective, foundation.

In *What Is the What*, then, we find a repeated tension between Valentino's contradictory desire that the silent, un-seeing witnesses to whom he addresses his account are forced to recognize his pain, to bear witness to his suffering and, by so doing, experience some modicum of his own human fragility, and his concomitant need to signal his narrative's unreliability as a corrective to the framework of the a priori. Remarking at one point on the singularity of the Sudanese in America, as a recognizable people who "look like no one else on Earth" (Eggers, 2006: 17) only a mere few pages after having recalled the frequency with which he has been confused for a Nigerian, a sort of metonym for all Africans in America (Eggers, 2006: 9),

Valentino's comments foreground both their internal contradictions and their illegibility under what is posited as a dominant reception of African experience in America. Elsewhere, as Valentino waits, bound and helpless on the floor of his apartment during the course of his robbery and assault, he finds himself under the surveillance of a young African-American boy, Michael or, as Valentino thinks of him, TV Boy. Having managed to loosen the tape placed over his mouth over the course of the evening, Valentino calls out to Michael, attempting to forge a human connection and, with it, an empathetic response to his plight. Instead, Valentino suffers further degradation, his face stepped on by the young man, who replaces the loose bindings with his foot before covering Valentino with cushions and blankets so as to remove him from sight. Helpless and enraged, Valentino's internal narration betrays the sheer frustration with which he meets this new humiliation: "I am finished with you, and wish you could have seen what I saw. Be grateful, TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighbourhood, and now see the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me" (Eggers, 2006: 73). Linking his impotent rage to a desire that Michael should know, should be forced to witness, forced to feel some of the degradation, violence and despair that he has known himself, Valentino makes plain the functional purpose of his story telling as one which extends beyond a more straightforward desire for the world to know his tale. Immediately succeeded by a return to his account of his childhood, Valentino's narrative makes explicit a governing conceit in its form, one predicated on the notion that his aim, in recounting his story, is to educate his interlocutors, both real and imagined, and, by so doing, cause a reassessment of the terms and conditions through which other lives and other forms of suffering are assimilated into the narrative of Euro-American humanitarian response. Throughout the novel, this move is repeated, as Valentino's constantly

rehearsed claims that his goal is to force a sort of understanding, one in which his interlocutors might comprehend all he has seen, occurs in concert with his recollections, exposing a more strategic aim to their unveiling. Explicitly claiming his anger at finding that his addressees “have no ears for someone like [him]” (Eggers, 2006: 142), that they “know nothing yet” (Eggers, 2006: 255), and, in the final sum of things, may not care, Valentino’s recitation of his life story takes on another, more utilitarian dimension specifically aimed at countervailing the pervasive passivity of the a priori and dominant narrative of African suffering.

Read as a whole, *What is the What* thus appears to function through a form of strategic appropriation, wherein by forcing a specular reckoning with his self-referentially unreliable narrative account, explicitly positioned through its utilitarian function, Valentino forges a form of testimonial documentary which reorients the delimitations of empathic understanding. If, in other words, *The Memory of Love* deploys a form of tacit unreliability in order to unmask the very foundations of the master-object binary, *What Is the What* renders its unreliability transparent in order to destabilize the didactic function of Valentino’s testimonial address. Yet, this reading of the text does not stand alone, framed and complicated by the novel’s paratextual apparatus. Notable here is the novel’s brief preface, written by Deng in a narrative voice distinct from Valentino’s first-person testimony read throughout the pages of the novel proper. As I have already suggested, in this paratext Deng, like the fictional Valentino, explains that the novel’s genesis stems from his desire, as representative of the Lost Boys, that the world should know his story. Indeed, the preface emphasizes its point that the novel, while a work of fiction, remains fundamentally true in a deeper sense, as Deng directly states that “the world [he has] known is not different from the one depicted within these pages” (Eggers, 2006: xiv). For the text, then, claims to truth and knowledge need not remain mutually exclusive from its self-reflexive

fictionality, a self-conscious paratextual move which “make[s] clear the strong didactic and moral purpose of and book” (Eaglestone, 2008: 78). Yet, when considering the workings of the paratext more broadly, a more complex reading of the preface emerges. In this reading, the preface is not merely a declaration of authenticity or intention, but rather reorients the novel in the direction of a tradition of writing about Africa in which the literary work serves as a site for an already-anticipated view of the continent, filtering its reception through an anthropological and humanitarian framework, even as the text itself calls these structures of understanding into question. Drawing on Genette’s study of the paratext as a framing apparatus, Huggan suggests that we may read such prefaces as a means of “*domesticating* the text, making it available for what might be euphemistically called ‘general consumption’” (2001: 272, footnote 21, emphasis original). In both marking the text as accessible, on the one hand, and marketable in its “authenticity,” on the other, the paratext produces a frame which both legitimates our affective responses as readers and endorses our sense of having in some way justified our pre-existing sentiments about the African continent as a land of exoticism, savagery, and fascination. Of course, the preface to *What Is the What* is categorically distinct from those discussed by Huggan and Genette, written not by an external “expert”, but rather by the subject of testimony himself. By so shifting the locus of mastery, the novel’s preface appears to anticipate the self-referentiality and metafictional critique of the text proper, while simultaneously calling into question the very applicability of expertise, as a category of knowing, in the context of traumatic witnessing. Throughout the preface and the novel, that is, a more playful critique of language and narration underwrites all claims to testimonial truth-value. Yet, this form of critical inquiry cannot and does not stand apart from the formal paratextual apparatus which buttresses the text; in addition to Deng’s preface, the 2006 Vintage edition of the novel includes several pages of

critical accolades from media outlets including *Salon*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times Book Review*; a map of Valentino's journey; a brief afterword describing Valentino's life after leaving Atlanta; and the web address of the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, created with Dave Eggers in 2006 and intended to promote charitable contributions to improve educational opportunities in South Sudan. While it may well be the case that *What Is the What* retains its force as a critical intervention into the documentary form and the testimonial genre in the tradition of writing Africa, it is nevertheless equally the case that this form of framing bears its own impact upon the novel's parodic performativity.

Given the novel's metafictional function, it is hardly surprising that a number of attentive readers of the novel have noted the subtle ways in which *What Is the What* destabilizes the West versus rest Manichean binary, particularly by highlighting the paucity of humanitarian showboating (see for instance Twitchell, 2011; Peek, 2012; Huehls, 2012). The novel, these readings explain, both highlights the limits of outsider intervention and foregrounds the poverty of universalist humanitarian rhetoric which seeks a total transparency in knowledge. Indeed, it is perhaps for this reason that critics have been able to assert that the novel manages not "to stray into paternalistic descriptions" (Yost, 2011: 150) and to "enable fellow feeling" without appropriation (Twitchell, 2011: 639) by making explicit the very failures of American humanitarian intervention in the face of that which cannot be fully grasped. Over the course of the novel we watch as Valentino is repeatedly betrayed by the promises of those who claim to be his saviors, faced with their superordinate, cannibalizing misery in the face of his situation and dramatizing the pornographic spectacle of appropriative empathy. Unable to follow his dreams of a higher education, plagued by headaches, and forgotten by the purveyors of largesse who brought him to America, Valentino embodies a sort of half-life spent working menial jobs while



attempting to study his way through his fifth year of community college, bound by the ever-increasing demands of his fellow Lost Boys and Sudanese community but unable to find the material prosperity which he once dreamed would be omnipresent in an America which fails to live out its own promises. Indeed, even the novel's pivotal episode, the murder of Valentino's girlfriend, whom he had met in the refugee camps of Kenya, takes place in America. It is America, as much as Africa, the novel suggests, which is a space of loss and violence, perhaps not of the same kind, but equally far from the promises of a liberatory modernity.

Throughout its course, *What Is the What* plays with this notion, and, with it, a form of equivalence which drives its critique of the hierarchies of global power. In a much-discussed early sequence in the novel, for instance, Valentino unwittingly opens the door of his run-down Atlanta apartment to an African-American woman asking to use his phone, unaware that her pleas are no more than a ruse to enter his home and rob him because, as he thinks to himself, "this is her country and not yet mine" (Eggers, 2006: 3). Later in the scene, beaten, bound, and gagged on the floor of his apartment, Valentino is addressed by the woman's accomplice, an African-American man of indiscriminate age:

Powder tilts his head to me and raises his eyebrows. He takes a step toward me and again gestures toward the gun in his belt. He seems about the use it, but suddenly his shoulders slacken, and he drops his head. He stares at his shoes and breathes slowly, collecting himself. When he raises his eyes again, he has regained himself.

"You're from Africa, right?"

I nod.

"All right then. That means we're brothers."

I am unwilling to agree.

“And because we’re brothers and all, I’ll teach you a lesson. Don’t you know you shouldn’t open your door to strangers?” (Eggers, 2006: 5)

Indeed, this is a lesson which Valentino badly needs to learn, as he himself acknowledges. Yet, what the narrative recounts next is telling:

In my life I have been struck in many different ways but never with the barrel of a gun. I have the fortune of having seen more suffering than I have suffered myself, but nevertheless, I have been starved, I have been beaten with sticks, with rods, with brooms and stones and spears. I have ridden five miles on a truckbed loaded with corpses. I have watched too many young boys die in the desert, some as if sitting down to sleep, some after days of madness. I have seen three boys taken by lions, eaten haphazardly. [...] And yet at this moment, as I am strewn across the couch and my hand is wet with blood, I find myself missing all of Africa. I miss Sudan, I miss the howling grey desert of northwest Kenya. I miss the yellow nothing of Ethiopia. (Eggers, 2006: 7)

Reading this scene, Twitchell argues that in Valentino’s lack of understanding about what a knock on the door late at night in an undesirable neighborhood might mean we see a sense in which “the United States and its customs are as shadowy to Valentino as Africa is to Americans” (Twitchell, 2011: 640). Indeed, here, as elsewhere in the novel, Valentino’s focalizing presence serves to defamiliarize the presumed readerly point of entry; rather than serving as the unmarked point of reference, that is, America, too, becomes another place whose appearance functions through a form of contingent positionality. Yet, despite its force as a rhetorical manoeuvre, there remains a sense in which the novel’s attempts to re-centre its point of orientation potentially minimize the extent to which Valentino’s ignorance is qualitatively distinct from the ignorance of the Americans who surround him towards Africa. Certainly, it is important, as Peek notes, that

the novel attempts to demonstrate the extent to which “we are globally interdependent as human subjects” (2012: 120). Yet, the notion of interdependence is not one which necessarily implies a straight-forward or easily-digestible equivalence, free from the tacit operations of global hierarchies of power or innocent in the construction of co-suffering (Ahmed, 2004: 21). This disjuncture is precisely due to the potency of an overdetermined and a priori narrative of African suffering which threatens to impinge upon our interpretive faculties where stories like Valentino’s (or Deng’s) are concerned. Recalling that it is only a certain demographic endowed with the privilege of empathy, while others “accordingly become the objects of others’ affective responses” (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012: 123), the narrative re-ordering of normativity remains at risk. For the American characters in the novel, like the American reader, a level of ignorance of Africa is tempered by a pre-existing belief that both this space and this story are somehow already familiar. Far from being “the line of demarcation for the Western imagination” (Twitchell, 2011: 623), that is to say, the production of an image of Africa and the reader’s implication within it as witness must contend with the coexistence of a longer and more potent tradition around the representation of the continent, both as a real and ideological space. Set in this context, the ignorance of the Euro-American remains an ignorance which does not know itself, which does not recognize its own positionality, and which, through its inability to read itself, inadvertently reasserts its superordinate position. Any attempt to “imagin[e] what cannot be known” (Twitchell, 2011: 624) as a means of ethical engagement must therefore contend with the extent to which Africa, writ large, is already overdetermined by that which is presumed to be known and that which enacts its perpetual reproduction across time and space.

In her work on ethics, moral philosophy, and literature, Nussbaum argues that “practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom; that emotions are

not only not more unreliable than intellectual calculations, but frequently are more reliable, and less deeply seductive” (Nussbaum, 1990: 40). *What Is the What* may well attempt to construct this sort of emotional connection, leading to an empathic shift in the reader through a heightened criticality towards the terms and conventions of its own discursive manoeuvres. Yet, through a sort of emotional equivalence built upon unexamined notions of universality, the text risks finding its experimental destabilization of the codes and conventions of the image of Africa undermined. The radical ambiguity which we find in *What Is the What* as a textualization of African conflict, suffering and pain functions in tandem with the knowledge that “the over-representation of the pain of others is significant in that it fixes the other as the one who ‘has’ pain, and who can overcome that pain only when the Western subject feels moved” (Ahmed, 2004: 22), allowing our pain and our discomfort to overwhelm our reading of the novel’s deconstruction of its own points of reference, enabling declarations that “Valentino is, as we all are, an eternally Lost Boy” (Twitchell, 2011: 641). In place of what Caminero-Santangelo (2012) has termed “the ethical necessity of recognizing that identification can never be complete, precisely because the [Western] citizen cannot fully know, emotionally, psychologically, and physically, the experience of [its others]” (466-7), a potentially totalizing mode of projection, identification, and consumption appears instead, reverting to the dynamics of an ever-encroaching tradition of writing Africa.

Both *The Memory of Love* and *What Is the What* attempt to destabilize the a priori image of Africa as a homogenous space of suffering, useful only insofar as it provides a backdrop for Western self-discovery and the affective transactions of an appropriative humanitarian impulse. Both novels have been quite rightly lauded for this attempt to re-write that which has been continually re-written over the course of over four hundred years of discourse around the

continent, and, by so doing, to expose and unmoor the insidious and often-undetected workings of the transnational circuits of power, affect, and feeling at both the individual and collective levels. In each text, moreover, the vision of the intrepid Western observer/humanitarian is made complicated by a realization of the limits of an unproblematic outsider knowledge and transnational engagement, allowing for a narrative space in which these very terms and conditions may be called into question and re-oriented towards a more just future. Yet, the means through which each text realizes its aims demonstrate that the limits of empathy, affect, and ethical understanding in the face of the unknown are not so easily moved. This, in turn, foregrounds both the resilience of the tradition of writing Africa under the specter of the already-known as an overdetermining factor impinging on attempts to engage beyond its vestiges in literature today, as well as the tenacity of other stories, other strategies, and other voices. In so doing, both texts attempt to explode what we may think of as the “prison house of language,” in order to more delicately unpick the tangled strands of understanding and representation which are under threat by the monolithic force of the a priori. Leveraging the possibilities of multiple readerships, multiple subject positions, and multiple forms of knowledge, these two novels demonstrate the complexity with which contemporary writing serves as a much needed redress to the staid single stories of history.

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